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ABSTRACT

The fluctuating effects of media can be observed by a data collection technique which reveals patterns of audience response similar to those which C.G. Jung observed in his analyses on word association and dreaming. The technique is known as Continuous Response Movement (CRM). A typical CRM training session automates the audience feedback process as they watch the exercise being demonstrated; group members record their moment-by-moment assessments on hand-held keypads. This paper discusses the importance of television as a source of dynamic data about the individual and society, and the need for new forms of media communication feedback. The discussion examines the use of CRM in the areas of politics, educational television, television advertising, management training, and community development. For example, an educational film about seal pelting and storage techniques was tested in two Canadian fishing villages, and 80 low-literacy fishermen took part in the analysis using CRM hand-units. Afterwards, their responses were shown to them, and the men seemed to gain insights about the similarities and differences in their views. The feedback sessions led to significant social change. Based on the studies discussed in this report, it is feasible that CRM methods can provide a quality of feedback about media effects which other research methods do not. (Contains 18 references.) (AEF)

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TELEVISION: STUFF OF DREAMS

by
Jon Baggaley

ED 393 424

Abstract

Since the techniques of modern visual communication are continually evolving, visual literacy is not amenable to rigorous definition in the same manner as verbal literacy. The fluctuating effects of media, however, can be minutely observed by new data collection techniques which reveal patterns of audience response similar to those which C. G. Jung observed in his analyses of word association and dreaming. The technique is known as Continuous Response Movement or CRM.

The Conference presentation demonstrated, via an electronic audience response method known as Time-Scaling™, the second-by-second patterns which unite an audience in tacit consensus towards media presentations, and the unexpected differences which divide them. The points at which an audience shapes the meanings of a presentation--and is occasionally shaped by it--were illustrated. The current paper discusses the importance of television as a source of dynamic data about the individual and society, and the need for new forms of media communication which feed this information back to them. Examples are given of the author's uses of CRM in contrasting areas of management training and community development (with Canadian fishermen). The extent to which an audience can ever become 'verbo-visually literate' is discussed in terms of international efforts to educate the public about AIDS.

Introduction

Community groups concerned about the effects of the media in society frequently remind us that today's child spends more time in front of the television set than in the school classroom. On this basis they argue that television is a more overwhelming source of ideas, images, and diversion than any other medium. Media researchers commonly counter this position of extreme concern by pointing to the ways in which the images of television are interpreted according to the individual viewer's psychological predisposition. They too argue that television is a powerful modern force. However, they stress that its effects are typically to reinforce the attitudes and behavior to which the viewer is already inclined; and they find these effects, in their own right, to be a powerful source of information about audience uses and gratifications.

Curiously, one other stimulus source with comparable powers is nowadays greatly overlooked. When the television set is off and we the viewer are asleep, images and ideas continue to bombard us via the medium of the dream. The nightly parade of dreams can divert and disturb us with the vividness and spontaneity of a technicolor movie; and psychoanalysts, just like media analysts, have found the dream to be a rich source of information about those who experience it. Both analysts, doubtless without realizing it, even favour the same research techniques; and today's media analysts are using investigative methods which bear a remarkable similarity to approaches developed by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung 85 years ago. We may turn, therefore, to the work of Jung for insights into the directions that current media research is taking.

Continuous Response Measurement

In the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (1907), Jung reported his use of a sophisticated laboratory system of pulleys, weights, slides, and balances, built to measure the second-by-second reactions of his subjects to verbal stimuli.

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From the information yielded by this highly precise measuring device, Jung developed insights into the individual psychological differences between his experimental subjects; and on that basis he devised the celebrated *word association* technique. Eighty years later, modern researchers are using similar second-by-second measurement principles in their studies of audience reactions to television. Today, their technique uses compact lap-top computer technology, and is known as *continuous response measurement* or CRM (Baggaley, 1986).

The CRM technique is relatively unknown outside the worlds of commercial and political advertising. Neither is apt to advertise or publish its approaches and findings, regarding them as trade secrets to be jealously guarded. But the powers and incisiveness of CRM are increasingly evident.

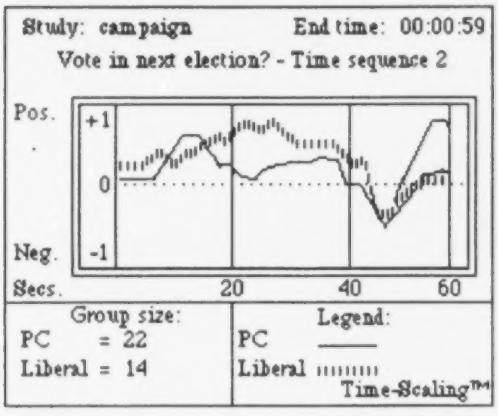

Figure 1. Voters' second-by-second responses to a television party political advertisement.

What, for example, do former US Presidents Reagan and Bush have in common with some of the most popular characters in children's television? Like the puppets of television's *Sesame Street*, their public images were monitored and refined following audience feedback collected via some sophisticated CRM research techniques. Figure 1 indicates the type of CRM data collected in the political research context.

The vertical axis in the Figure represents the average responses on a scale of approval (from positive to negative) to a television election campaign advertisement, given by supporters of two different Canadian political parties. The horizontal axis indicates the passage of time, second by second. Taken as a whole, the graph demonstrates how the viewer's responses fluctuated as a direct function of the moment-by-moment television stimulus. In the hands of party political researchers, the precise moments at which the audience responses become positive and negative can be charted on this basis, and used to advise campaign strategy. In the hands of commercial researchers, the same techniques are used to develop maximally persuasive television advertisements for beer and soap flakes.

Fortunately, the use of these incisive techniques is becoming increasingly familiar to television viewers, particularly in the media's political campaign coverage. After the 1991 Gulf War, for example, the crucial role of CRM was noted; and during the 1993 Australian national election, viewers of the television leader's debate on Channel Nine saw a simultaneous second-by-second reading of audience responses known popularly as the *white worm*.

CRM 'Behind Closed Doors'

From their innocent applications in the hands of Carl Jung, to their often Machiavellian uses in modern political research, CRM techniques have a far-reaching and to some extent frightening potential; and their quiet evolution in the North American television industry makes a fascinating story.

In early 1988, Vice-President George Bush was considered a long shot for the US Presidency. His position as second fiddle to Ronald Reagan represented a severe handicap to his election hopes; and compared to *the Great Communicator* his smiling image seemed wimpy and wan. Clearly some serious image-doctoring had to be done.

During the final months of the campaign, Bush underwent a metamorphosis. Gone was the quiet and diffident Bush: In its place was a tiger. A battery of opinion research techniques had supported the need for the new image. Question and answer techniques defined Bush's public image in the regular manner. In addition, his second-by-second appeal for television viewers was recorded on electronic hand-units via CRM.

The CRM method revealed parts of Bush's public image that other research techniques could not reach. The audiences' moment-by-moment reactions showed that they had particular respect for him at instants when he projected a tough-guy persona. In a real sense, their perceptions were subliminal, for only the researchers were in a position to recognize the patterns of opinion revealed by different viewing groups. The art of public pulse-feeling had reached a powerful new level.

At first blush, such methods sound unethical. Their association with secretive political research adds to that impression; and George Orwell would be proud to note that Republican advisors first used the second-by-second technique in their reelection bid of 1984.

However, the same approach has long since had a far more innocent application, in the development of some useful educational television shows, notably in New York and Toronto; and George Bush and the *Sesame Street* Big Bird owe CRM methods a similar debt of gratitude.

CRM In Education

The subliminal nature of CRM is a major reason for its political appeal. The most persuasive tactics in a person's bid for high office are often those which the public around him does not consciously recognize. But after ten years' work with these techniques in Canada, we have concluded that their potential benefits outweigh their abuses. We have used them in the development of educational films and television campaigns, to identify ways of communicating topics which audiences find difficult to discuss verbally. We have used them in communication skills workshops, providing teachers and executives with feedback on the aspects of their presentation which need improvement. As with any communication tool, the ethics of CRM obviously depend on the intentions behind its use.

During the '70s, for example, an unusually profitable relationship arose between producers and researchers at the Children's Television Workshop in New York. Together they devised some highly pragmatic ways of inspecting their young audiences' programming tastes. In conjunction with the Ontario Educational Communications Authority, a second-by-second response system was developed, providing more precise insights into children's perceptions than were available by regular question-and-answer methods. Although the CRM method was not new, the advent of the microcomputer in the late '70s streamlined it; and some of the most successful series in children's television (e.g., *Sesame Street* and *3-2-1 Contact)* were based upon its findings.

During the '80s, inevitably, CRM has found more lucrative markets. To advertising researchers, the method offers obvious benefits in the pilot-testing of television commercials. Since time is money in a 30-second television spot, every second must carry as much weight as possible. Moment-by-moment measurements of viewer's reactions indicate the specific points at which a television spot should be expanded or tightened. In this way the advertiser searches for ways of keeping his audience's attention remorselessly engaged. With modern computer facilities, CRM feedback can be instantaneous, allowing the evaluation to take place during the production process itself. On this basis, actors and camera crew can be briefed about the impact of shots they have just taped. A live television presenter can

even note viewers' responses to one sentence before moving on to the next!

CRM in the Training Industry

Particular uses of these techniques can be envisaged in the training industry. Management colleges, for example, spend appreciable sums of money to provide their executive clients with video feedback exercises dealing with interpersonal skills and the strategies of public performance. Yet, in terms of depth and precision, conventional feedback procedures languish in the Dark Ages compared with those used to sell soap flakes and US Presidents.

In a conventional video feedback session, a group of trainees is presented with an exercise (e.g., a debate, conference presentation, television interview takes, or a role-playing/simulation game). They carry it out individually or in small groups, and their progress is videotaped for subsequent analysis by the group and/or a specialist. Such exercises have been used since the '60s, to teach skills ranging from counselling and negotiating to trampolining and the golf swing.

A typical CRM session is based on a similar range of assignments, but automates the audience feedback process. As they watch the exercise, either live or taped, the group members record their moment-by-moment assessments of it on the hand-held keypads (Figure 2). The assessments may be given on any basis: interest value, clarity, persuasiveness, credibility, or any other relevant index. A computer-animated graph indicates the momentary high and low points in the sequence (as in Figure 1), and can be synchronized with the video record so that the reasons for second-by-second perceptions can be precisely identified.

These procedures obviate a common problem of traditional discussion situations: the inability of group members to achieve consensus and to level with one another. If a trainee public speaker has a distinctive speech pattern or a nervous tic, the participants in a face-to-face discussion may find it difficult to agree whether the trait is harmful to the trainee's impact--or even to mention it at all. CRM feedback, on the other hand, is clinical and anonymous. The implications of a nervous smile or fumble are evident in the immediate rise or fall of the audience responses whenever it occurs. Responses with no statistical are discounted by the analysis routines, and trainees readily acknowledge the detached authority of the computer display.

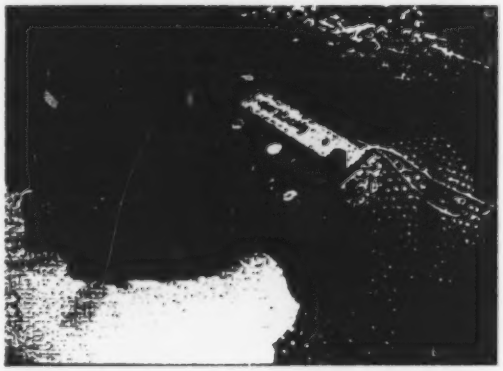

Figure 2. A CRM keypad used by a farmer's wife in a field on Mount Kenya to critique a pilot-test version of a radio agriculture program.

It is reassuring to note that these methods do not tend to breed the bland, stereotyped styles of communication encouraged by some training approaches. CRM's unusual sensitivity to nonverbal factors indicates that, in the right situation, an idiosyncratic, even tense style of communication can be a credible asset. With second-by-second precision, the CRM hand-units disclose that nothing impresses an audience more than *having something sincere to say*. The approach offers, in fact, an antidote to training procedures which yield an off-the-peg style of communication, and indicates that communication style without substance counts for little in the critical audience eye.

Just as Republicans Reagan and

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Bush may have won their Presidential election campaigns by adjusting their personal styles, so their Democratic opponents may have lost them by failing to. In 1988 for example, while Bush turned tiger, Michael Dukakis strove to look relaxed, to look the television camera in the eye, and to look *presidential* in the JFK mould. While television comics lampooned his approach, Dukakis persisted in using a smooth, bland style which political analysts have debunked for years. The Dukakis policies may have been substantial, but his style did not help him to communicate them.

In future contexts, it is inevitable that strategic planners will seek to define the public mood more thoroughly than the Dukakis camp did in 1988. CRM methods will assist them in this, indicating accurate perceptions of public affairs as well as the public relations strategies via which they should be discussed. This possibility was illustrated in an unusual project in Atlantic Canada in 1982.

CRM and the Community

The Canadian seal harvest was under siege. The European Parliament had boycotted the seal pelt, and Atlantic fishermen were facing hard times. To help them maximize their dwindling income, the Federal Fisheries Ministry commissioned an educational film about pelting and storage techniques. In order to check whether the film needed any revision, its rough cut was pilot-tested in two fishing villages 400 miles from St. John's Newfoundland.

Eighty fishermen took part in the analysis. Their literacy levels were low, and normal questionnaire/interview methods were unlikely to be much help in probing their views. Group discussions were unlikely to elicit their unguarded opinions in view of the issue's extreme sensitivity.

Using CRM hand-units, however, many of the men responded nonverbally and anonymously to the film, with a decisiveness which surprised even themselves. The data were cross-referenced with further responses given after the film, and were fed back to the men for their own use. In the process, the men seemed to gain insights about the similarities and differences in their views which had not been apparent previously. The feedback sessions proved to be key events in a process of community development which led, within a year, to the formation of the Canadian Sealers' Association and to significant social change.

On other social fronts, the process of change takes a little longer. In Montreal we have been studying attempts since 1986 to inform the public about AIDS, and comparing the campaign styles with the greatest and least educational impact. CRM studies have revealed that audiences prefer simple, straightforward styles of information on health topics, and that, for example, florid or melodramatic elements are received negatively by viewers. Yet AIDS campaigns using a straightforward approach have often been withheld from the public on suspicion that they may have harmful effects. Meanwhile, many broadcast campaigns have used complex advertising techniques which CRM studies have shown to be inappropriate.

Clearly something in the management of these campaigns is awry. It may certainly be assumed that the divers styles used in AIDS education to date have been developed in good faith. But they cannot all be right; and it is highly probable that conventional market research methods are failing to define the actual psychological impact of public health promotion strategies with sufficient clarity.

Conclusions

If the studies discussed in this report are any guide, it is feasible that CRM methods can provide a quality of feedback about media effects which other research methods do not yield. Questionnaire and interview methods, administered before and after exposure to campaign materials,

may be quite incapable of eliciting the fine-tuned responses which CRM methods detect while the materials are being viewed. When the issue at hand is as sensitive as, for example, AIDS, the anonymity of CRM responses is also likely to increase their reliability.

Since the images and situations conveyed by the communications media are so varied and so permanently susceptible to change, it is possible that our efforts to understand their effects in terms of *verbo-visual literacy* skills may be too ambitious. In view of the vast range of individual differences in viewers' reactions to media, a more pragmatic approach, focussing on the second-by-second idiosyncrasies of the media consumer, may now be timely. It seems to be no coincidence, therefore, that modern media researchers are returning to the meticulous techniques used by C. G. Jung to examine individual psychological differences. Via this time-honored paradigm, modern researchers may find the effects of television to be a rich source of data about the individuals, just as psychoanalysts have found the dream to be a mine of information about the dreamer. The content, form, and effects of television may come to be regarded as indeed *the stuff that dreams are made on.*

Numerous contentious issues arise in society which this approach to communications research could be called upon to resolve. Health, the environment, trade: public campaigns are needed on each of these public agenda items, and their design strategies need immediate attention. Traditional communication research strategies certainly seem unreliable in dealing with them. (As this chapter is written, a Canadian television election advertisement, presumably based on the most up-to-date of conventional research methods, is having disastrous effects for the national political party which has sponsored it.) The new CRM techniques have shown that they can help in these areas by:

1. Sharpening discussion of issues, attitudes, and communication styles.

2. Revealing patterns of public opinion which would never be suspected normally.

3. Punctuating myths about communication practice which seemed unassailable.

4. Reassessing stock approaches to communications management which do not seem to be yielding results.

Such methods sometimes seem Machiavellian. Or maybe they are simply better at distinguishing the politics and style which the public wants from those it does not. Either way, we have seen to date that continuous response measurements of a person's communication style can help him to gain the most powerful executive office in the free world. Perhaps they can also help him to use it in the best possible way.

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